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SUBJECT: SOUTHERN VIOLENCE: KEY CONTACT'S NEW TIDBITS ON
SECURITY FORCES

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Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR SUSAN M. SUTTON FOR REASONS 1.5 (B,D
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11. (C) Summary. In a 28 December meeting with Polcouns and poloffs, Dr. Panitan Wattanayagorn, a well-regarded academic with close ties to the military and the palace, outlined his continued frustration with Prime Minister Thaksin's micromanagement of RTG policy towards the South and offered new details on army and police operations in that region. Polcouns reiterated our strong concern over the potential for human rights violations and the negative impact they would have on our bilateral relationship. End Summary.

TOO MUCH MEDDLING FROM BANGKOK

12. (C) PolCouns and poloffs met with Chulalongkorn Professor Panitan Wattanayagorn on December 28 to discuss the South. Panitan, a longtime Embassy contact and adviser to both the military and the palace, will be leaving Thailand in the coming weeks to take up a visiting fellowship at the Johns Hopkins University School for Advanced International Studies in Washington for the Spring term.

13. (C) At the macro level, the National Reconciliation Commission (NRC) plays a vital role, but its members remain overly fixated on a "utopian" solution, and need to develop alternatives grounded in the "reality" of the South. RTG policy, meanwhile, remains bedeviled by overly intense and erratic attention from the leadership in Bangkok. Efforts by the PM and his top advisers to micro-manage government operations in the South lead to new, big overarching plans to solve the violence but there is rarely any follow-through. Deputy Prime Minister and Justice Minister Chidchai Vanasatidya, Thaksin's point man on the South, is starting to understand the problem, but the military still lacks confidence in him. The PM may trust Chidchai, but in order for him to lead successfully, the military must trust him as well.

14. (C) That said, Panitan believes that the Royal Thai Army CINC, General Sonthi Boonyaratglin, has had success bridging the traditional divide between the police and army, and has developed a good relationship with Chidchai. More importantly, Sonthi is able to "absorb some of the pressure" from Thaksin and Chidchai, and shield his subordinates on the

ground in the South from their whims. Sonthi's ability to hand-pick the new commander of the 4th Army Command (responsible for the South) further represents his clout in the capital.

NEW TACTICS: SOME BAD, SOME BETTER

15. (C) From a tactical perspective, Panitan believes that the picture is mixed. The Southern Border Peace Building Command (SBPBC)--the organization responsible for coordinating security in the South--remains far too complicated. The SBPBC's predecessor (which Thaksin dissolved) was far from perfect but was much simpler, allowing for easier and faster coordination and action. The most effective system, according to Panitan, would strike a balance between the two; producing better army-police-local government coordination while also coopting local Muslim leaders.

16. (C) The government's new emphasis on public lists denoting those southerners involved in the violence is hamstrung by poor intelligence at the village level. Those people on the list are now expected to go through a government "re-education" program in order to be removed from the list (Septel will further explain this new program). The idea may be good "but how good are the lists?" According to Panitan, some villagers are "forced" to cooperate with the insurgents; for example, threatened with harm if they do not put spikes on the road at specific times. Locals are "caught between the government and separatists."

17. (C) When asked about late-2005 rumors that the army had planned a major shift in tactics in the South, Panitan explained that the 4th Army is in fact placing 5-10 soldiers in individual villages as a local guard force, but the program is not widespread yet. These soldiers will, over time, be able to forge relationships with the locals, develop

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intelligence and help insulate the villagers from the insurgency. Panitan believes that the military also needs to undertake more aggressive jungle operations against the separatists, but such operations require more trust between officers and enlisted personnel. Many junior officers do not have the experience yet to inspire their men to take the needed tactical risks. When asked if the RTG has enough forces in the South to conduct both more aggressive operations as well as garrison duty, Panitan replied that the 15,000 army and 20,000 police on the ground now should be enough for the task.

18. (C) That said, suspicion and lack of trust between the army and police on the ground are "worse than (he) expected." This is, in part, due to Thaksin's (a former police officer) initial decision to give the police the lead role in the South. Putting aside his natural bias as an adviser to the army, Panitan admitted that local police are more effective than sometimes given credit for, but pressure from Bangkok to use special police units from outside the South may cause some "problems." Polcouns repeated our concern that pressure on some units to produce results could lead to extrajudicial killings and other violations of human rights, which could have severe implications for our bilateral programs. Panitan took the point; he responded somewhat cryptically by saying that there are many things that the police are doing that are very secret and "compartmented."

WHO ARE WE FIGHTING?

19. (C) Panitan also offered some skepticism on recent reports that the Barisan Revolusi Nasional-Coordinate (BRN-C), a forty-year old separatist group, was playing a lead role in the violence. According to Panitan, this is an attempt to use an old label for new people. The current generation of separatists look for old, established names to help them win

local respect and revenue. Indeed, Panitan divided those involved in violence into three groups: a small core group of separatists with ties to the old movements, segments of the general population frustrated with corruption and historical grievances, and finally, a small number of disciplined radicals who may or may not have ties to the international jihadist movement. The first group of separatists represent a trend that will always exist in the South. The general public must be won over by the government. The final group--which worries Panitan the most--will be very hard to stop but must be wiped out.

COMMENT

110. (C) Panitan is one of our most thoughtful and well-connected interlocutors on the South. That said, his influence lies with the army and palace--two institutions which do not always see eye-to-eye with Thaksin's southern policy. The army's new village defense tactics are very interesting and could, if extended, fill a key gap in the current security picture--minus the pomp and disruptive fanfare of other "new" tactics. More importantly, they may represent the army's attempt to quietly play a more independent role in shaping the RTG response in the South.
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